

Reviews

Peter Swirski, *American Political Fictions: War on Errorism in Contemporary American Literature, Culture, and Politics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. 214 pages. ISBN 978-1-13751-888-0.

The taxpayers are, of course, reluctant to pass judgment on the economists, because they feel—and are made to feel—that they are not smart enough to wrap their heads around the math and the jargon. As a result, when a microphone is shoved under their noses, John and Jane Doe fall back on soundbites about the invisible hand or about less government in business and more business in government. Meanwhile, deregulation of banking and financial markets paves the way for meltdowns that regularly wipe out trillions of dollars in shareholder value and reveal palliatives about free market for what they are: great American fictions.

This excerpt of Peter Swirski's latest monograph *American Political Fictions: War on Errorism in Contemporary American Literature, Culture, and Politics* unpacks just one of a myriad of errors, myths, and outright lies that abound in American politics. Interestingly, as Swirski spares no effort to document, they are produced and circulated in equal proportions by the political elites and by the public.

As the subtitle of this brilliant book suggests, Swirski wages a war against these errors and he does it in provocative and enlightening ways—just as popular political art he dissects does. He purposely selects a wide range of American fictions for dissection, from left to right, from lowbrow to nobrow, and not least from the Hill to the White House, all of which offer him a vantage point for a critical look at American political literature, American political culture and American politics. Coming in the wake of his *Ars Americana*, *Ars Politica* (2010) and *American Utopia and Social Engineering* (2011), which were reviewed and praised on both sides of the Atlantic and across the political spectrum from the arch-conservative *Financial Times* to the arch-liberal Howard Zinn, *American Political Fictions* cements his reputation as one of our most interesting critics and scholars of contemporary American literature and American elitist politics.

Beginning with Joseph Heller's "novel as history" *Picture This*, the book launches a comparative discussion of Periclean Athens, the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic and the USA under Reagan and Bush administrations. In the process it develops a panoramic picture of American democratic imperialism. Fortified by evidence from congressional hearings to strategic documents of national security and economic statistics, the chapter reveals how war and money twine to form the bedrock of human nature across centuries.

Swirski then asks what happens when religion is grafted onto politics and education and casts a critical eye over the apocalyptic fiction series *Left Behind* and its deep impact on American public life. He unravels a tangled web of links between Christian fundamentalism and America's mainstream political platforms, which include displacing democracy by charismatic leadership, polarizing electorate at the expense of collaboration and compromise, and openly advocating mass behavioral control. Although not intended as such, the chapter reads as a great satire. Sections such as "Apocalypse Now"—which confronts the fuzzy logic and dissociated theology of fundamentalists—or "Idiot Nation", "The Texas Textbook Massacre", and "Team America" document the anti-intellectualism of the Bible-thumpers and the sorry state of what passes for American education.

Other than the evangelical version of apocalypse, is there another version of doomsday that hangs over our heads? In Chapter 3, Swirski directs the spotlight on Alistair Beaton's *A Planet for the President* in which benevolent American hegemonists kill seven billion people and create a planet for POTUS alone. Aided by personal interviews with Beaton, Swirski scrutinizes the affinities between Obama and Bush, muckrakes the gap between Obama's bark on election trail and his bite in office, and warns of homegrown fascism enabled by the expanding power of the President and erosion of citizens' constitutional rights.

In "(R)hyming (A)merican (P)oetry" Swirski passionately argues that rap is the quintessentially American genre of poetic and musical expression. He brings out rap's lyrical complexity, its social and aesthetic appeal and its political credentials, which enjoy cross-racial appreciation and turn political rap into "the CNN for young people all over the world". Always entertaining and often downright funny, Swirski documents how "political" rap (the kind you will never hear on MTV) transcends the common perception of hip-hop as a lowbrow mass entertainment. The lyrics that Swirski quotes, full of "street vernacular", manifest in themselves the "liv-

ing expression of authenticity in American speech”, which is absent from political rallies and mainstream corporate media. It is no wonder that H. Bruce Franklin enthusiastically endorses *American Political Fictions* from the back cover with the remark that “the chapter on rap alone is worth the price of admission”.

Coming last, Chapter 5 delivers perhaps the strongest message. Although Swirski acknowledges the impact of *The West Wing* on American political life as the “civics and history classroom”, he criticizes the award-winning show for reinforcing the stale myths of American democracy—the sanctity of the presidency and the representational system of government among them. In an alternative to the current American political establishment, like de Tocqueville Swirski initiates a debate about the nature of democracy in America, which he defines as “power to the people”. He not only pinpoints the illusions of people’s power instilled by mechanisms like presidential campaigns, but also analyzes Swiss, Californian, and European Union’s practices of initiative and referendum, and sheds the light on the premises of direct democracy: open access to information and education.

In a nutshell, Peter Swirski is a great storyteller. His brilliant stories about artists and con-artists, fictions and facts surrounding American politics are written with wit and humor that make his arguments compelling and a pleasure to read.

Alicia Huang

University of California, Berkeley

Lily Geismer, *Don’t Blame Us: Suburban Liberals and the Transformation of the Democratic Party*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015. 392 pages. ISBN 978-0-691-15723-8.

The suburbanization of the United States in the decades following the end of the Second World War marked a profound economic, political, and cultural shift in American history. Though achieved through Eisenhower’s acceptance of the New Deal consensus and the government’s broad role in society, the change has historically been understood as a part of the growing political strength of conservatism. In *Don’t Blame Us: Suburban Liberals and the Transformation of the Democratic Party*, Lily Geismer complicates this partial understanding of suburban politics.